

Title: Learnability of Words in Deliberate Vocabulary Study

Format: Paper presentation

Abstract:

Deliberate learning of word pairs has been proven to be effective (see Nation 2013:437ff) and robust in spite of losses over time (Groot 2000, Laufer 2005, Fitzpatrick et al. 2008). Contrary to often voiced criticism about the limitations of such learning, it is not inferior to deliberate learning of words in context (Groot 2000, Webb 2007, 2009), and results in knowledge beyond the basic word-meaning link (Webb 2007). At the same time, research has drawn attention to factors promoting or inhibiting list learning, such as: direction of learning (Mondria and Wiersma 2004, Steinell and Hulstijn 2007), semantic clustering (Tinkham 1993 and 1997, Waring 1997) and word characteristics like frequency, concreteness and cognates (Lotto and De Groot 1998, De Groot and Keijzer 2000). Most of these studies have been conducted in strictly controlled experimental settings, often using a limited set of (pseudo)words.

The present study starts from a realistic learning task. Upper-intermediate EFL students with Dutch L1 were given a set of 80 English L2 words on the topic of work relations, arranged in five thematic sublists with Dutch glosses, and accompanied by concordances. The first stage was a single session in which students were pretested, given one hour to study, and posttested. The next stage consisted of three hours of study over three weeks during which students logged their studying, followed by an announced posttest. There was a further posttest after a 5-week delay. At each stage there were posttests of receptive recognition, productive recall and productive use. Data were analyzed to detect gains and losses, linking these to effective study behavior and to characteristics of the words and the materials – this paper focuses the latter. Factors identified as influencing different types of learning are: L1 wordfrequency, and cognateness (positive and negative factor).